

## **The Unusual Annual Mammogram**

I went in for my annual mammogram a few years ago. It was very routine, considering that a mammogram involves getting your breasts smashed between two plates of glass at unusual angles. Once the films were developed, I got a phone call.

A nice woman from the Women's Imaging Center called to politely ask me if I could come in for an "Enhanced Mammogram". I thought – here we go again. I have had lumpy breast issues for 15 years, igniting doctors' concerns from New York to California. Apparently, it was time to go through it again now that I live in Washington State.

As fate would have it, my previous mammograms from California got lost in the mail, so there was no history for these doctors to evaluate changes in breast tissue. I had the recommended Enhanced Mammogram, getting squished again at 4 different angles while holding my breath. At the end of the appointment, they told me the radiologist was currently reviewing the films, and I asked to look at the films myself.

The Radiologist showed me where there were a dozen tiny dots in my breast. I had always looked at my films in the past, so I knew that these spots were new. The Radiologist said they were calcifications, or calcium deposits in my right breast. He was concerned about the number of them, and felt further study was needed.

I have heard that many women with breast cancer "know" when something is wrong with them. I am typically in tune with my body, and did not feel that anything was amiss. I knew I just needed to consult with a doctor about my options and not get emotionally wrapped up in the unknown.

My first step was to go home, admit that I was scared, call a friend, and have a good Boo-Hoo cry about my fears. After that was done, I decided that I would just make the next appointment, continue to firmly believe that all was well, and not dwell on my fears.

I consulted with a surgeon and decided to undergo a Stereotactic Breast Biopsy. My dear friend, neighbor and “Jewish Mother” drove me to the hospital. God Bless her because I really needed a friend with me. Upon arrival, the nurse was consoling and gently explained the procedure which is far from comfortable. But it is a minimally invasive way to get a sample of breast tissue. As I look back on the procedure, I can only try to describe it with a sense of humor.

I was asked to lie on a long, narrow table with a hole in the center. It took three nurses to help me lay down my side and properly position myself on this contraption. The final maneuver required me to drop my right breast through the hole in the center. The table is engineered for the average height of a woman (about 8” shorter than me), so my legs where oddly bent and hanging off the end of the table. Once positioned, they jacked me up six feet into the air, so they could work underneath me.

At that point, I had a great concern. *What must I look like from the doorway? I’m 6 feet in the air with my boob hanging through a hole in this table! Will they be doing the Jiffy Lube 25-point inspection?*

Just as my mind was occupied with these thoughts, the nurses put my breast into a vise grip. They advised me not to breathe too deeply and that this vise grip will be in place for – gulp – the next 45-60 minutes. At this point, I could only try to focus on relaxation and yoga breathing, which really helped. I inhaled slowly 1-2-3-4 and exhaled slowly 1-2-3-4, letting my Jiffy Lube picture float away. They took a digital picture of my breast, injected an anesthetic, made an incision, and inserted a hollow needle. The staff members were quite kind and worked as quickly and gently as they could. They finished up in a record 45 minutes. I spent the next several days using Advil and ice packs to avert swelling near my incision.

Two days later and received great news is that everything was normal. I just had calcium deposits that need monitoring, but no cancer cells. I was thankful that I got to stop and

think about how I want to treat my body. I was thankful for friends who supported and advised me. And I was thankful for good and patient doctors and nurses who helped me through painful and unusual procedure.

October isn't the only Breast Cancer Awareness month. You are in charge of your health every month. Do your self-examinations. Work with your doctor and educate yourself about what needs to be done. Get regular exams. And finally, take a step back to appreciate you and your body, what it does for you, and how you can treat it, so it can support you – even through the scariest moments.

Judy Ann Michael is a consultant, coach, and author helping businesses transform their vision into action. She is also a financial educator and is the author of *Living the 10 RetireMyths: An Unconventional Journey in Retirement Planning* and the upcoming book *How Much???: The Surprisingly Simple System that Shows Why you Need More \$\$\$ Than You Think*.